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Drum Voice

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Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

My creative practice works to incorporate my own experiences and memories and connect these to issues confronting Indigenous communities. As I continue to develop this practice a key work has proven to show or highlight these issues. This work, reinterpreting the traditional drum form has offered immense possibilities. This document considers certain aspects of my culture and ask what Indigenous art means today.

Keywords

Drums, Drum Circle, Woodland Cultural Centre, Heritage, Native, Indigenous, Community, Naomi Johnson, Tom Hill, Traditional.

Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank my advisor, David Merritt he has been instrumental in guiding me through the last year of my graduate studies. His experience and knowledge have been truly helpful in completion of my studies. I also like to thank the examination committee Patrick Mahon, Kim Moodie, and Dolleen Manning. Thank you to the Faculty of Visual Arts and Technical Staff, truly a place of knowledge when it comes to the scope of art making. A special thanks to friends and colleagues, also to the people who I had studio visits with, Ron Benner, Michael Farnan, Shelly Niro, VSVSVS, LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs and Ross Bell. Also, a very special thanks to Naomi Johnson, her insights on promoting and protecting Indigenous knowledge and heritage is proving to be a valuable resource within her place of employment at the Woodland Cultural Centre, in Brantford ON.

Also to my wife, Laurel, this remarkable person has been a with me through all, the amount of love and support from her certainly made this possible. And to our children, Aydan, Cecilee and Quincee, I cannot express how grateful I am, the joy of seeing you everyday.

Introduction

My time at Western in the MFA program has been a fitting place to pursue the development of my practice. I also completed my undergraduate at Western. The scope of my studies in the program has certainly broadened my range as an Indigenous artist, particularly through observing different perspectives and critical exchanges. In the past two years, my work has been increasingly productive by uncovering the creative potential of traditional forms. By opening the work to incorporate my own experiences and memories and connecting these to issues confronting Indigenous communities. As I continue to develop my practice more a work has proven key to showing or highlighting these issues. My work with what I call the *drum* has expressed immense potential in engaging work. I look at certain aspects of my culture and ask what Indigenous art means today. The following writing explores this very question to help us get a better understanding.

Making a connection with such a valuable resource I learned of the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford Ontario through their annual First Nations Art show. Experiencing such a diverse group of Indigenous artists across the country in one place has proven to be valuable place in seeking knowledge of First Nations heritage. I soon made connections there and interviewed Naomi Johnson, the Centre's artistic director. Our discussion of its role will show how the WCC is a valuable resource in promoting, protecting Indigenous heritage.

Introduction

The following interview was conducted on the 12th of July 2017 in Brantford ON. The interviewee is Naomi Johnson artistic director of the Woodland Culture Centre. The center is located on the grounds of what was once called the Mohawk Institute Indian Residential School. It is now a non-profit organization that preserves and promotes First Nation culture and heritage. The focus of the interview is to achieve a better understanding of what Indigenous art means today.

The extensive programing at Woodland covers many areas promoting Indigenous culture. Areas include language, education, theatre, music, dance and includes a museum and a library. I made my connection with Woodland through their annual First Nations art show, an initiative that has been running since the early 70's. When I first learn about the open call for submissions to the show I quickly submitted work. Having submitted work for the past 3 years I have witness the diversity of art being displayed by many Indigenous artists across the country.

The primary goal of the First Nations Art show is to protect and preserve Indigenous art.

QS: How has working at Woodland change your perspective on Indigenous art work?

NJ: Through my work at Woodland I've been able to work with a broader community of Indigenous artists in multi-disciplines. I wouldn't say my perspective has changed, if anything it has reaffirmed them. We are diverse and have an essential perspective/narrative that must be shared. I've been honored to be in a place where my job is to give opportunity and space for these creations.

QS: What are your thoughts on the non-indigenous viewers that visits the center?

NJ: The visitors to our Centre come from all over the world. Our primary visitors are school-age children from southern Ontario. We offer a perspective on our history and culture that is not offered anywhere else in this country. When I give a tour of our institution my duty is to share truthful and accurate historical/cultural information. I am grateful for the opportunity to illuminate other perspectives that exist, and are often untold or under told.

QS: Working at Woodland, do you feel that Indigenous art is becoming more and more "contemporary" in meaning? Do you see a break from traditional Indigenous art work? (bead work, pottery etc.)

NJ: The only thing that is keeping Indigenous artists behold to "traditional-based forms" is the market for this aesthetic. I say this without contempt -- I believe that if an indigenous artist is creating in more "western" mediums, the subject matter will be apparent in their works. Even if displaying one's indigeneity isn't a goal for the artist, we are at long last coming to a place where indigeneity is becoming more accepted by the larger arts community. However there remains a need for indigenous arts to be indigenous-apparent.

QS: Your curatorial practice?

NJ: Working as the Artistic Director of the Woodland Cultural Centre we work within curatorial themes that umbrella over all our programming (museum, contemporary art, performance, language, etc.) These broad themes help to determine what artists/shows to program for 3 years. On a personal level -- diversity is a larger over-riding theme when it comes to what I select for exhibition.

QS: When did you come to Woodland? Your interest in Indigenous Art

NJ: I started at the WCC as a summer student at the age of 19. I was just beginning my undergraduate studies at York University and the WCC was a natural place for me to seek employment during the summer break. I worked with Tom Hill, who was then Museum Director. Tom Hill has been a trailblazer and ground breaker in Indigenous contemporary arts practices. He was instrumental in the creation of the Indian Pavilion at Expo '67 and from there was afforded many opportunities to work within the arts across Canada/US including the National Gallery of Canada, Banff Centre for the Arts, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and Royal Ontario Museum (among many others). For nearly 20 years I've been fortunate to call Tom my mentor and friend. We continue to this day to converse about the arts, and I've often sought his guidance with matter pertaining to the WCC.

QS: A question I have been dealing with personally concerns my own relation to Indigenous art, as an Indigenous artist. What are your thoughts/see on what it means to be an Indigenous artist in the field of contemporary art today? I am particularly interested in your standpoint as curator.

- NJ: What we offer as indigenous artists and curators is a unique perspective on current society -- whether it be about our local communities, Canada, North America, or the world. The perspectives, world views and ideologies we have as indigenous people are rooted in the ancient teachings and knowledge of our ancestors -- teachings that we have held on to despite the assault of colonialism. This unique knowledge is what guides us as indigenous artists in our practices. Because we still operate in spaces and systems that are constructed from colonialism, our avenues to share our perspectives will always be tentative. We must work towards supporting Indigenous-lead institutions as well as supporting independent Indigenous curators/artists in mainstream spaces.
- QS: As curator what are some the important questions you look for in Indigenous art? And from the standpoint of the WCC?
- NJ: On a more pragmatic level - I primarily look for quality work and an artist's ability to use their chosen medium to fill the gallery space with a confident body of work. Depending on the given themes of the year this too will influence what is exhibited. Our mandates and missions help guide our themes -- so when you whittle it all down, I am looking for work that protects, preserves and promotes our cultures.
- QS: What are your thoughts surrounding settler culture within Indigenous art? Certainly, we see this in many forms, but within Indigenous art.
- NJ: We must utilize the avenues that have been opened to us as Indigenous arts professionals. Certainly, there has been significant changes in the arts landscape with more major institutions hiring indigenous curators, however many of these hiring's have been on contract. If true reconciliation is to be made in the arts sector (as in all sectors) sustainability for our arts professionals must be a primary goal.
- QS: A question of perspective, relating to curatorial practice, do you see a change in the diverse Indigenous practices you have encountered?
- NJ: One major shift I have seen in Indigenous arts practices is a return to primarily creating in "traditionally-based" materials. For the previous 2 decades you were more likely to see indigenous artist creating works with "western" materials that would have an "indigenous spin". There seems now to be a growing desire to explore traditional-based materials/forms and perfect/expand on what you can do with these as contemporary art mediums.

QS: What is the mandate of the center? And how is the location significant of it sitting on residential school grounds?

NJ: The mandate of the centre is to protect, promote, and preserve the cultures of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe, or Eastern Woodlands Peoples.

The significance is that it has now a 45-year history of doing work to, exactly what I said, protect, preserve, and promote the culture as opposed to what the site was – a residential school to destroy and commit cultural genocide and eliminate all those things. So, it's a healing - it's a site of healing, I guess, of what the site used to be. Pretty significant.

QS: What is the impact of this site on its audience, both six nations community and settler?

NJ: Well, impact on our audience – it's a diverse community at Six Nations. I would say for our artists we have a significant impact because we are often the first place that they feel comfortable approaching, you know, as a professional artist. They either take the stage, or perhaps get an exhibition, or a lot of people have gone through there and have gotten jobs, myself included, as a student. And then from there – I would say probably 90% of the staff that we've ever had at Woodland have been summer students at one point. So, it's impactful just as a place professionally if you're interested in arts, culture, history, or education. And then I would say another impact would be for residential school survivors. It has the potential to allow them to, I guess, come to terms with the place and enact and be involved in the programming that we're doing. So, a lot of the survivors will actually give tours on a regular basis. There are several that do it on a regular basis such as Geronimo Henry and Roberta Hill. Roberta is a former student, she's on our advisory committee for all the work that we're doing now to re-renoate the school. So, she's going to have a lot to contribute in what happens when it comes to the interpretation of the place for all our survivors. And there's several survivors that we've taped sharing stories, so while the school's down and inaccessible people can come and see, almost like a little documentary, their telling their own personal stories. So, it's like a healing – a way to heal and reconcile what's happened.

I'm also looking at the other, settler, community. The WCC is very unique – it's one of the only places a visitor can come and get the perspective from our community on history of our area and of our culture and of our languages and of our arts. And like I've said, we're a fully Indigenous organization even at the governance level with our board. They're all comprised of members of the three support communities, which are Six Nations, Tyendinaga, and Wahta. So, it's pretty valuable. Definitely a perspective they're not going to get anywhere else.

QS: You mentioned the diversity of programming, can you elaborate on this?

NJ: Yeah, so, we are in departments, it kind of happened naturally. Because initially when the centre was conceived it was primarily to be an educational centre and they had people doing both archaeological, historical research and it was all about gathering this data. Once they had it all they decided to open the museum as a way of communicating to visitors. And then the first Executive Director, his name was Crane, he started exhibiting Indian Art, which was kind of new, because in 1974 when Indian Art first opened, it focused on displaying contemporary works by Indian artists. It was good for our community too, because it opened up a realm for people that are working in different mediums and it was during a time when people thought of “Indian art” and stereotypical things came to mind – you know, trinkets and craft goods to sell. And then with Tom Hill, as Executive Director in the late ‘80s through the ‘90s until 2005 when he retired, was really intrinsic in making connections with other galleries and major art organizations nationally and putting Woodland on the map as a place to see contemporary First Nations art.

So, what ends up happening, you open up the historical museum, and the art gallery has broken away into its own thing extending even more recently to include performance art. So, there’s theatre, music, dance – which every year we now program annually. And our other departments are education, which provides interpretation for visitors, mostly school groups and the library, that’s existed there since the beginning. It’s a non-lending library, but it’s one of the best resources for anything Indigenous. Language instruction has also been there since the beginning, and it’s mostly a resource department as well. Initiating different programs with community groups. They also do an annual language conference.

There was a chart, I can’t remember where I saw it, but it shows all the languages that are going extinct and the prediction is that the only First Nations languages that will be spoken besides some of the Inuit ones are Mohawk, Cree, Anishinaabe, and another from the West Coast, but it suggested there would be less than a dozen where there would be people still being able to speak it. It’s sad.

QS: Can you tell more about your perspective on Indigenous artist practices?

NJ: Speaking personally as a Curator and somebody that programs Indigenous art, I like to think of indigenous art as being more fluid and I’m really open to different mediums and inspirations. It’s very vast what we’re able to tap into, and rich and deep, because we have so many things that we need to put out into the world for ourselves and for non-Indigenous people. I think it’s hard to be in a place where you’re always constantly

thinking about your art in terms of presenting it to non-Indigenous eyes, and I find that we tend to do that allot. And this makes sense, because that's where the people are, that's where the galleries are, that's where the money's from, and that's where it's going. It is what it is. I do like presenting works that are just for the joy of creating it as well as anything that is hard-hitting, socio-political. There's a myriad of issues that we can tap into. That's why I like working with First Nations– I keep calling it First Nations art, but it's Indigenous art now – it's very diverse both in the levels that people are practicing and in and the diversity of their mediums. It gives you a good cross-section of how vast it is with our communities, the modes that we're practicing and creating in.

QS: Have you noticed any changes in artist's approach since Tom Hill's time?

NJ: I think there's definitely more of a push--well first there's more of an acceptance, and a push towards traditional forms and an appreciation of traditional materials and forms, which I don't think existed in Tom's time. It was really more of a "see we can do what you do as well" kind of mentality that artists were presenting in their work. I think that would probably be the biggest change that I've witnessed.

QS: We all have our favourite Indigenous artists, I personally I like the work of Brian Jungen, any particular artists you are interested in and why?

NJ: [laughing] I might get in trouble if I single out some people - I guess these are *some* of my favourites. Quinn Smallboy would be one – see what I mean? Well I'm going to have to maybe single out Hannah Claus just because I'm currently writing a piece for her. I'm not sure if you're familiar with her work, she has an exhibition up at Art Space right now and she very much works in that vein, kind of similar to you, of large installation sculptural pieces. She showed her piece Cloudscape at Woodland.

I've been working a lot with Beth Doxtator and she works in cornhusk, so she's really taken on that traditional-based "material" and kind of bumped it up a level and she's doing some very interesting things with that. I like her whole idea that our stories - we haven't had these iconography-type imagery, like, say Da Vinci and the Last Supper, we don't know what ours would look like because it might have been perceived to be as of the same level as, say, a painting or a sculpture by Western culture standards. So, I like her vein of thinking with that.

You can look at the First Nations artists that we've displayed. I wasn't joking when I said Quinn Smallboy, I really find your aesthetic so unique and I just love what you're doing. And then I would say Jennifer Lickers from last year was really great too. If you

ever want to know who I'm interested in it's usually artists that are displayed in solo shows, those are the ones I'm really trying to promote and get out into the world.

Documentation of practice

The following list of images highlight my studio process. Images consist of detail close-ups of work from experimentation with space, random encounter with objects to finished and resolved works. Materials are comprised of diverse types of ropes/string, types of wood.

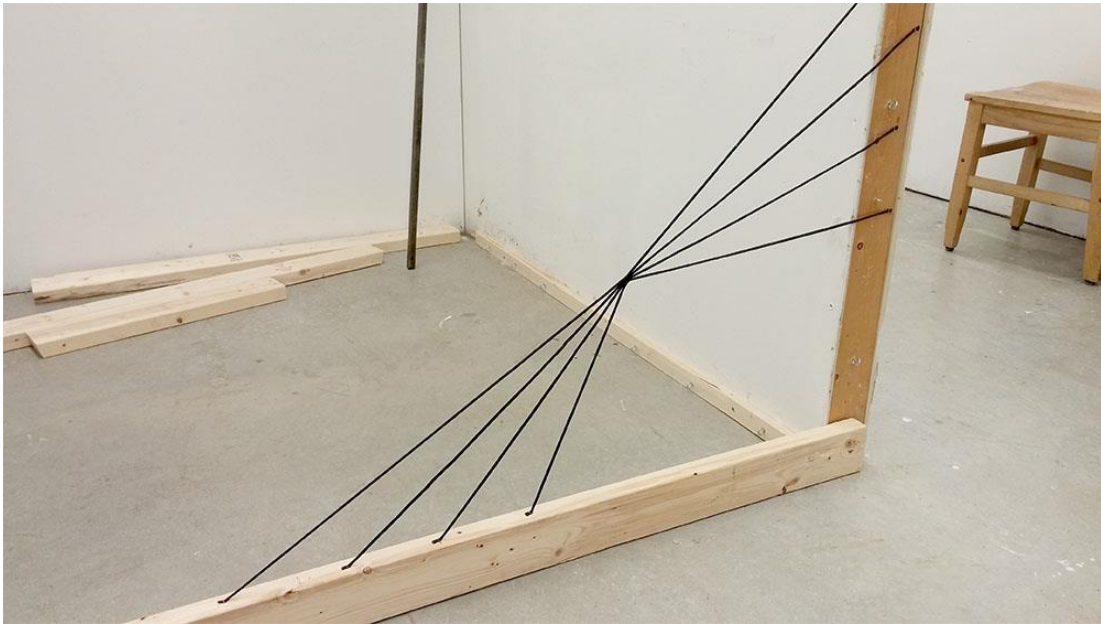


"Drum ring #1-x in progress studio work" Jan 2016

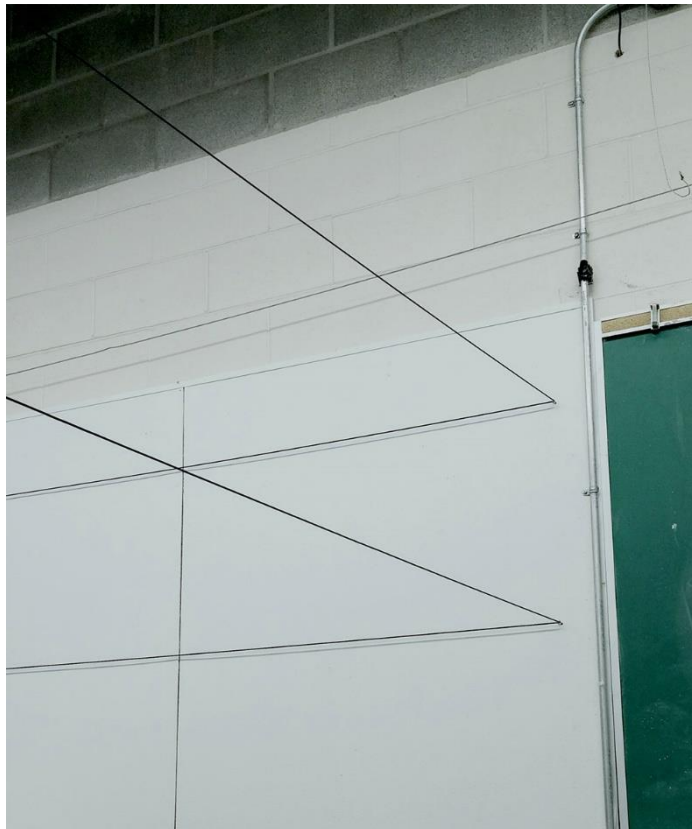
The circle object on the floor is the first of what I refer to is called a *drum ring*. It's in its early stage of construction.



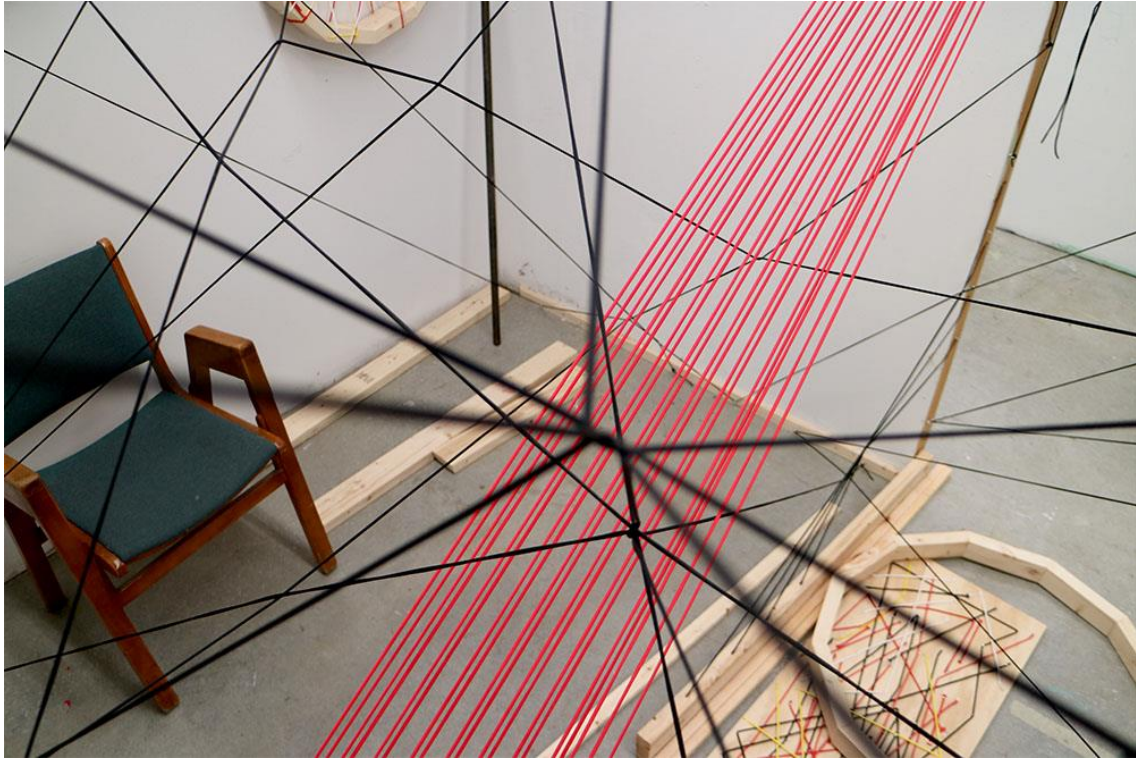
"Drums sizing #2-x in progress studio work" April 2016



"Stitch #3-x in progress studio work" July 2016



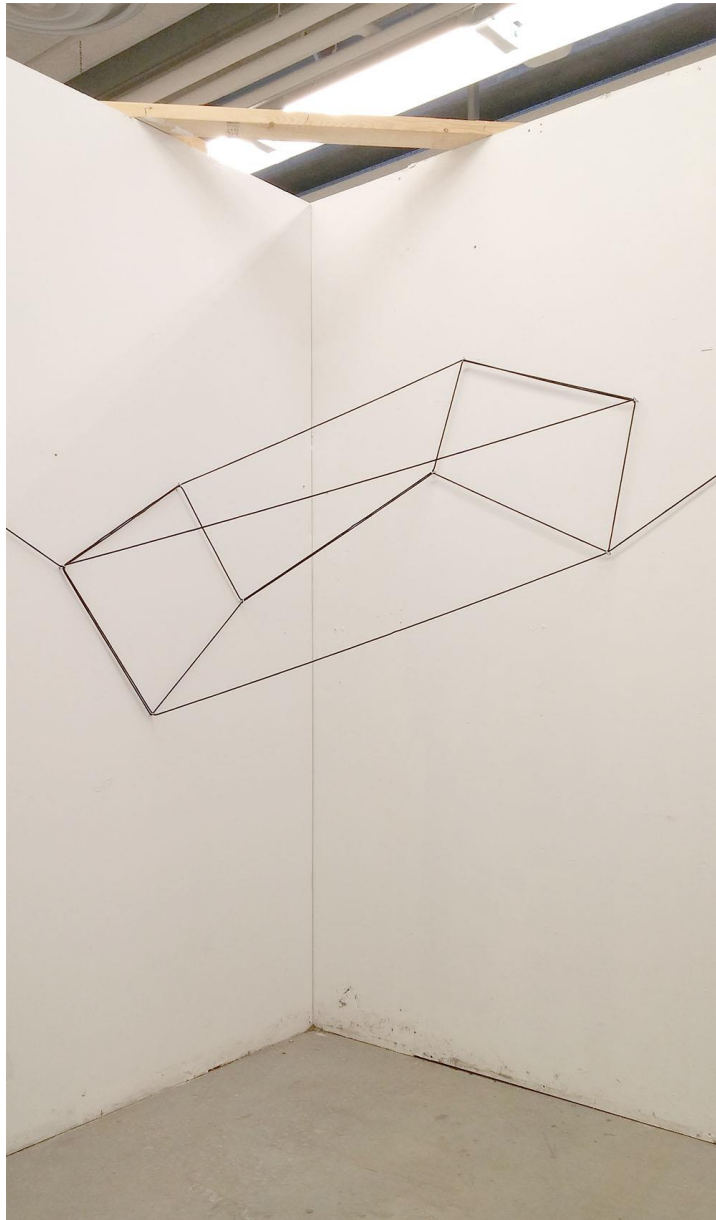
"Square #4-x in progress studio work" October 2015



"Space/Void exploration #5-x in progress studio work" August 2015



"Space/Void exploration #6-x in progress studio work" August 2015



“Wall exploration #7-x in progress studio work” November 2015



“Line Spacing” December 2015 – Nylon rope – Western University



“Trap” November 2015 – Nylon rope – Western University

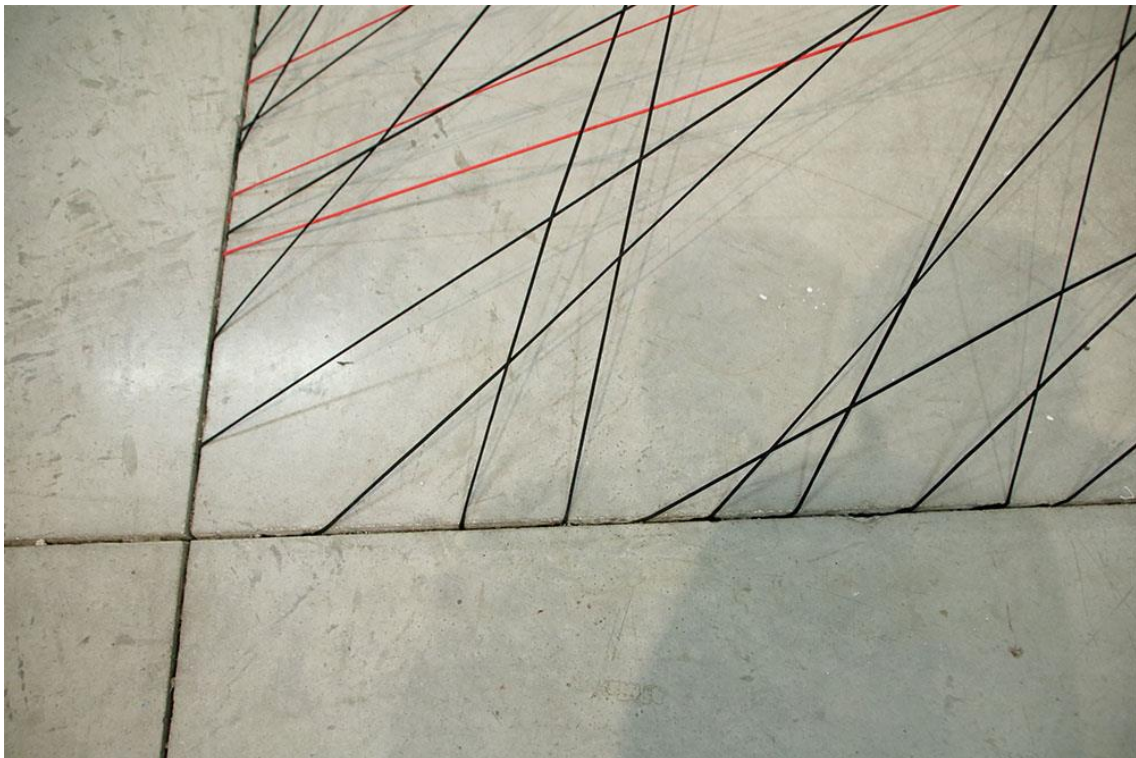


“Drum Series” April 2016 – Nylon Rope/Wood

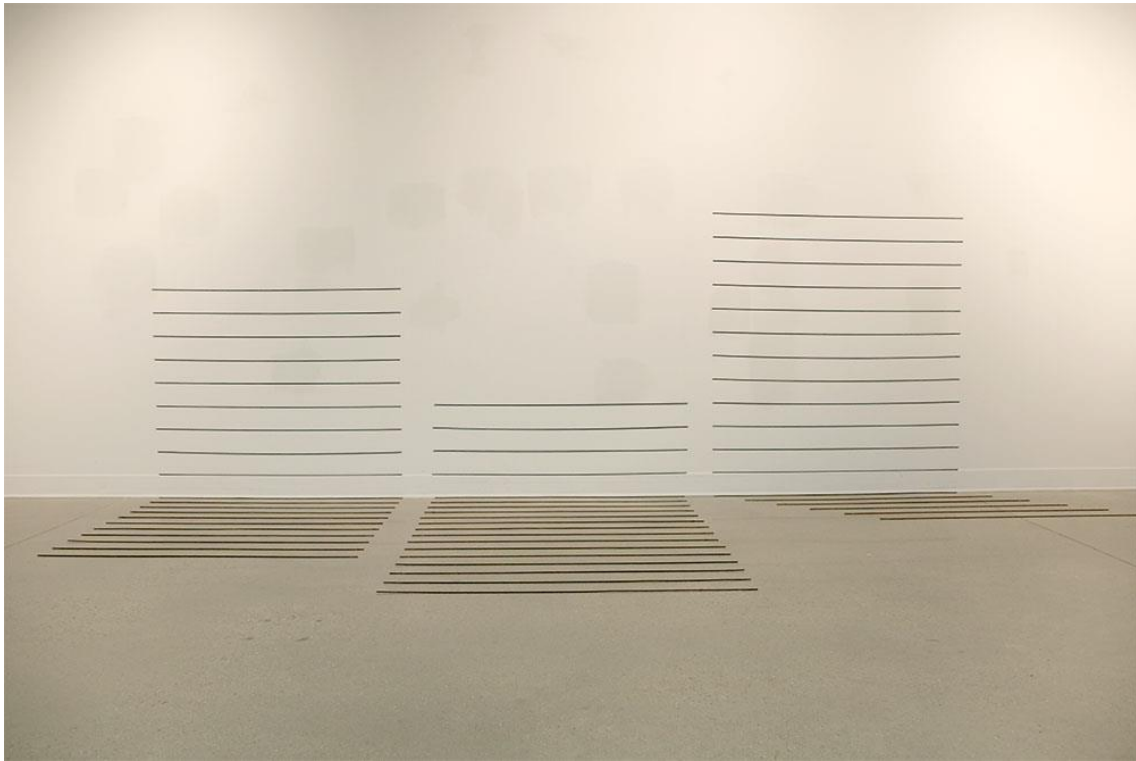
End of 1st year Critique Day April 2016 – Western University



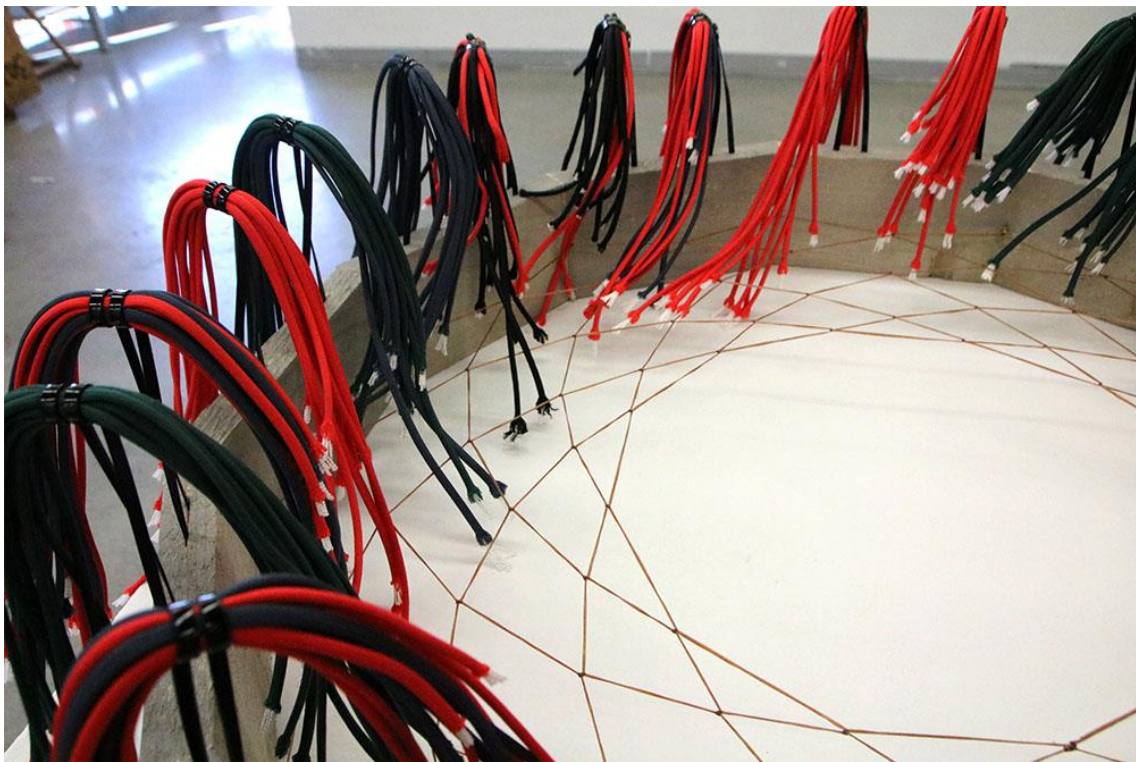
"BlackRed" October 2016 – Nylon Rope Installation Artlab Gallery – Western University







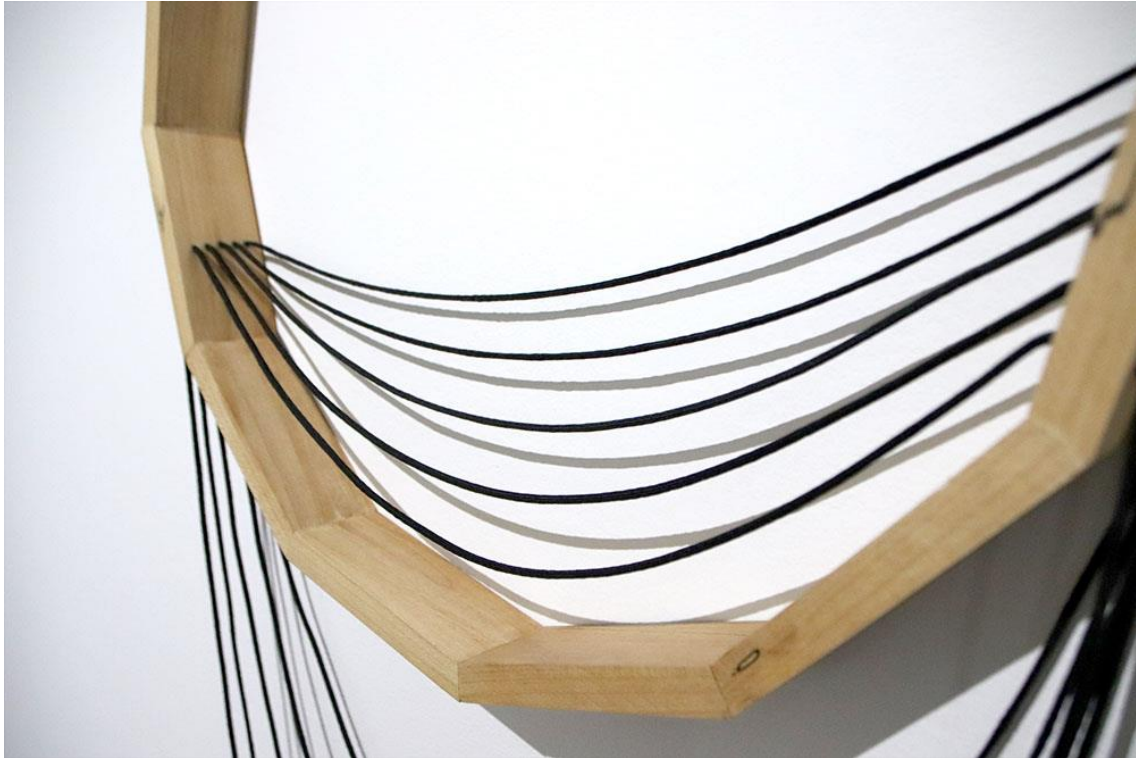
“Angle” December 2016 – Nylon Rope Concourse Gallery – Western University



"Drum Circle" April 2017 – Nylon Rope/Wood/Sinew – Western University



"Nest 1" September 2017 – Nylon Rope/Wire McIntosh Gallery – Western University
"Nest 2" September 2017 – Nylon Rope/Metal McIntosh Gallery – Western University



“Water” September 2017 – Nylon/Wood McIntosh Gallery – Western University



“Net” September 2017 – Nylon/Wood McIntosh Gallery – Western University



Thesis Show at McIntosh Gallery September 2017 – Western University

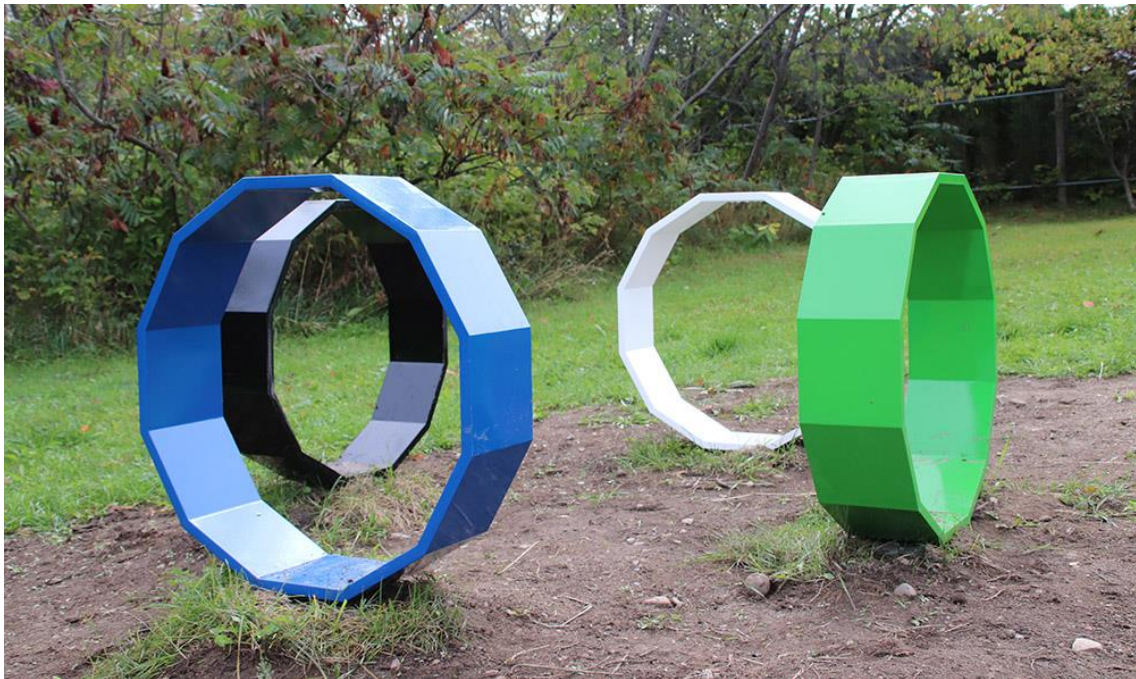


“Wave” September 2017 – Nylon Rope Installation – McIntosh Gallery – Western University



"Water" September 2017 – Nylon/Wood – McIntosh Gallery – Western University





"Drum Circle" September 2017 – Metal Plate – Manitoulin Island

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Belmore, Michael, and Frank Shebageget, Rice, Ryan. *Scout's Honour*. Museum London (London, Ont.); Urban Shaman Gallery; University of Lethbridge. Art Gallery, 2008

Berlo, Janet Catherine, and Ruth B. Phillips. *Native North American art*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

Arrhenius, Sara, and Tomás Saraceno. *Tomás Saraceno 14 Billions*. Skira, 2011.

Jungen, Brian, and Diana Augaitis. *Brian Jungen*. Vancouver Art Gallery, 2010.

McMaster, Gerald R., et al. *Indigena: contemporary native perspectives*. Douglas & McIntyre, 1996.

Duffek, Karen, and Tom Hill. *Beyond history: May 31 to July 17, 1989, Vancouver Art Gallery*. The Gallery, 1989.

Links

The following link is my Artist statement

<https://youtu.be/mnIcH5GHFRk>

CV

EDUCATION

University of Western Ontario 2nd Year Sept.2016 – Current

Master of Fine Art Candidate

University of Western Ontario Sept. 2010 – April. 2014

Bachelor of Fine Arts Studio Arts Honors, Specialization

First Nations Studies Minor

Fanshawe College Sept. 2000 – April 2004

Graphic Design received Diploma + Multi Media and Production Design received Diploma

COMMISSIONS

Drum Circle Public Sculpture with 4elements Living Arts

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Playing a String Game McIntosh Gallery Western August 10 - September 9, 2017

First Nations Art Show Solo Exhibition Woodland Culture Branford Ontario (May 2017)

Plexus DNA Art Gallery London, Ontario (Nov 2016)

I Know What You Did Last Summer ArtLab London, Ontario (Sept 2016)

The McIntosh Gallery Western University Student Online Exhibition (April 2016)

First Nations Art Show Woodland Cultural Center Branford, Ontario (May 2016)

First Nations Art Show Woodland Cultural Center Branford, Ontario (May 2015)

Closed System/Sustainable Growth ArtLab London, Ontario (Jan 2015)

What Plants Crave ArtLab London, Ontario (March 2014)

Turnover London ArtLab London Ontario (March 2014)

ARTISTS TALK

Oct. 19 – Dolleen Tisawii'ashii Manning, Anishinaabe Artist-Scholar; past Lecturer: Visual Arts, Western (MFA, Simon Fraser University; MA, CSTC, Western; PhD Candidate, CSTC, Western) Quinn Smallboy, Anishinaabe Artist (BFA, Western; MFA Candidate, Western) Dolleen Manning and Quinn Smallboy will speak on their respective practices, and converse on "Art and Indigeneity."

PUBLICATIONS

Frist American Art Magazine Fall Issue 2016 Provide images for article by Matthew Ryan Smith

The Artists' Connection 5: Indigenous Perspectives Dundas Valley School of Art, sold work (June 2016)

Indigenous View Book 2014, London, Ontario

PROFESSIONAL WORK

Teaching Assistant Graduate Duties (Sept 2016 – Current)

Teaching Assistant Graduate Duties (Sept 2015 – April 2016)

Design logo for Indigilink, is a professional social networking and collaboration for those working in the field of Indigenous research and policy.

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

University of Western Ontario

Indigenous Services Peer mentoring first year students into Visual Arts (Sept. 2012 – Jan 2014)

ART INTEREST

Attend gallery openings, exhibitions, artist's talks. Photography.